

Dear Fellow Sunshine Coast Residents:

Despite ongoing concerns about the potential for COVID-19 variants to increase infection rates again, there has been a lot of positive news in the past few weeks. Across the globe, COVID-19 infection and death rates have been dropping, and last week brought news indicating that vaccinations are already making a dramatic difference as more and more people are being vaccinated.

The number of new cases in BC has dropped significantly since the beginning of the year and here on the Coast, we have only had a few people test positive for COVID-19 in the past two weeks. We are also very pleased to report that all of our long term care residents and care workers have now completed their COVID-19 vaccinations.

As many of you are likely aware, the first-dose protection offered by the three vaccines approved in Canada appears to exceed 90 percent. As a result, the Province has decided to extend the time between doses to four months. This will allow more people to get their first immunization sooner than we had originally anticipated, and we now expect that everyone in BC will be able to get their first immunization by mid to late July. This is amazing news and we hope that this will get us back to normal sooner.

This week we will be entering [Phase 2 of the provincial immunization plan](#). This means that everyone 80 years of age and older who has not already been vaccinated will be eligible to receive their first vaccine starting on March 15th. Vaccinations will also be available for indigenous seniors aged 65 and older, as well as healthcare workers, vulnerable populations, and others who support or work with seniors.

Starting on Monday, March 8th, anyone on the Coast who is eligible can call 1-877-587-5767 toll free to book a vaccine appointment. Make sure to have your personal health number and a pen and paper handy. Please do not call this number if you are not currently eligible, as this will cause delays for those who are eligible.

Even with all this positive news, we are still some ways from being able to ease off our current restrictions. For those of you who are continuing to do your part and do everything you can to protect our community, we thank you. For those of you who are having a difficult time accepting that the restrictions are necessary, or questioning whether COVID-19 is real, or acting in ways that put your neighbours, friends and family at risk, we would ask you to reconsider your approach.

While we strongly believe in open communication and healthy respectful debate around COVID-19 issues, these discussions need to be based in reality, facts and science, not disinformation and pseudoscience. If there is no acceptance of the realities of COVID-19, then it is impossible to have a meaningful debate or discussion.

COVID-19 is real and has impacted 100s of people in our community, both directly and indirectly. We have had more than 140 people test positive for COVID-19 on the Coast. While most did not require hospitalization, some did become critically ill and ended up in Intensive Care. There really is no controversy about what defines a case; here in BC, a case is a person with COVID-19 symptoms in whom COVID-19 genetic material (RNA) has been detected.

Likewise, we know that COVID-19 is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which has had its genome sequenced for well over a year. Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) testing is an appropriate and well-proven technique used to detect SARS-CoV-2 RNA in patient samples. Any arguments to the contrary have no scientific basis.

For those who argue that COVID-19 is no worse than influenza, one has only to look at US influenza data from the [CDC](#) to know that this is false. Over the past ten years, influenza has resulted in 9 to 45 million infections per year, 140,000 to 810,000 hospitalizations per year, and 12,000 to 70,000 deaths. In the past year, [CDC data](#) indicates that COVID-19 has resulted in over 28 million known infections, millions of hospitalizations, and over 500,000 deaths in the US.

This means that approximately the same number of people have been infected with COVID-19 as usually get infected with influenza, but the death rate is seven to 40 times higher than we typically see with influenza. That this has happened in the context of significant restrictions, and despite all the precautions many people have been taking over the past year, further demonstrates that the SARS-CoV-2 virus is both far more effective at spreading and far more lethal than influenza.

Over the past year, researchers have identified the cell receptors to which the virus binds and have identified a number of cellular mechanisms by which SARS-CoV-2 causes the clinical symptoms that we see. We have identified a number of humangenes which increase susceptibility to developing more severe COVID-19 symptoms. We also have good evidence that physical distancing, washing hands, and wearing masks are practical measures that help to limit the spread of COVID-19.

If we had continued living our normal lives with no restrictions, millions of Canadian would have been infected within a relatively short span of time. Of those millions, somewhere between 10-15% would have become ill enough to be hospitalized, and approximately 5% would have become critically ill, with approximately 2.5% dying (as per [Government of Canada data](#)). This means that many more thousands of people across Canada would have died unnecessarily and many thousands more would have developed severe life-threatening illness, with lifelong health implications for many.

While our healthcare system has significant capacity, that capacity is not infinite. Hospitals, healthcare workers and support staff are a finite resource and most were running at or above capacity before COVID-19. If we had let COVID-19 spread unchecked, we would have faced the very real risk of overwhelming our hospitals and healthcare systems. If this had happened, we would have been unable to help people we otherwise could have helped (for both COVID and non-COVID-related health issues), resulting in even higher rates of severe illness and an even greater loss of life.

It has been amazing to witness the thousands of researchers from all over the world who are working tirelessly to find treatments that will help us fight COVID-19 more effectively. Others have achieved unprecedented success in developing multiple safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines in a timeframe that was previously unimaginable.

Unfortunately, the development and distribution of effective treatments and vaccines takes time. While we have made significant progress in terms of treatment and prevention, we still have to continue with the basic measures that we know work to limit the spread of COVID-19. Until we have a sufficient portion of our population vaccinated and a low level of infection and death rates across the province, we will continue to need restrictions to help prevent our worst case scenarios from occurring.

It is vitally important that all of us continue to work together to protect our community. If we disagree or have questions, let us do it in a respectful way and have conversations that are based on facts and the accepted science, not rumours and unproven theories that have little basis in reality. Let's treat each other with kindness and compassion and support each other through this difficult time. We are getting close to the point where restrictions will start lifting and life will start shifting back towards normal, so let's keep up the good work that has protected our community so far.

In the meantime, if you have questions about the vaccination plans for our community, please call the Sunshine Coast COVID Vaccine Info Line at 604-885-8714. Please do not call our local Public Health Units, as they are hard at work implementing our local immunization plan!

Please arrange for testing right away if you have even one of the key COVID-19 symptoms: fever, chills, new cough (or worsening of a chronic cough), difficulty breathing, or loss of sense of taste or smell. You should also get tested if you have two or more of the following symptoms for more than 24 hours: a sore throat, headache, extreme fatigue, diarrhea, loss of appetite, nausea or vomiting, and muscle aches.

If you meet [criteria for testing](#), please contact the Respiratory Assessment Clinic by phone or text at 604-740-1252, or by email at [coastrespclinic@gmail.com](mailto:coastrespclinic@gmail.com). The clinic remains open seven days a week from 8:30 AM to 4:00 PM.

While you are awaiting assessment or test results, you must [self-isolate](#) at home, ideally in a separate space where you can limit contact with other members of your household. You must continue to self-isolate until you have tested negative and your symptoms have resolved. If you test positive for COVID-19, you will have to continue self-isolating until you are cleared by Public Health.

If you have more severe symptoms and believe you may need to be admitted to hospital, please go to the Sechelt Hospital Emergency Department. If you need an ambulance, please call 911. Please remember that the Emergency Department remains open and safe for anyone with a medical emergency.

Keep well and please keep doing everything you can to keep our community safe!

Sincerely,

The Sunshine Coast COVID Physician Task Force

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